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ABSTRACT

An investigation of how some school districts construct and maintain needed links between evaluation/testing and curricular/instructional activities is presented. Researchers must build on the twin strands of research about school and school district organization and developments in testing, evaluation methodology. School district characteristics which might inhibit data use include loose organizational coupling, teacher isolation, permeable organizational boundaries and goal ambiguity. Using information from previous studies, four school districts which link evaluation and instruction were selected for intensive study. Specific information about one of the four school districts is presented in this paper. This case study is used to demonstrate that the elements of ideas, operations and coordinating mechanisms are necessary for linking testing, evaluation and instruction subsystems. (CM)

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USES OF DATA TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTION IN LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS: PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES*

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Uses of Data to Improve Instruction in Local School Districts: Problems and Possibilities

The existence of test or evaluation data which reveals students' achievement in particular subject or skill areas does not, inevitably, lead to beneficial changes in classroom instruction and concomitant increases in student learning. We have found that without competent and sustained attention by district management to communication and supporting services, the use by principals and teachers of such data remains problematic. We believe that the naturally occurring characteristics of school organization and classroom instruction impede such use.

In this paper, we acknowledge that research on testing and evaluation has made great advances in the past 15 years; and that other research on school and school district organization has contributed to the field's understanding of how these institutions operate. We argue that researchers must now build on these twin strands. We report on our work which is an investigation of how some school districts do, in practice, construct and maintain the needed links between their evaluation and testing activities on the one hand, and their curricular and instructional activities on the other.

Introduction

Since its inception in 1972, the National Institute of Education (NIE) has supported research related to educational evaluation. Some of this research has contributed to our understanding of the ways in which evaluation and tesing data can improve educational practice in American schools. From the research has emerged an important observation: the transformation of evaluation and testing results into improved school and classroom activities does not occur automatically. Instead, such transformation appears to be a complex process influenced by many factors, including the specific individuals who are expected to take action and the organizational settings within which they work.

Two large groups of individuals are potential users of testing and evaluation findings. One such group is policy makers, external to a school district who work within federal and state legislatures or agencies. Evaluators expect that large-scale evaluations of federal or state-funded educational programs can give policy makers at these levels sound information on which to base changes in local program requirements, or to augment or cancel these programs. A second user group includes individuals internal to a school district: for example, board members, administrators, and classroom teachers. Evaluators expect that data collected about students can be of direct interest to within-district administrators and teachers who are responsible for fine-tuning their own curriculum and instructional programs.

At first glance, it would seem that the findings from any given program evaluation could be equally useful to both groups of people,

each of whom could make needed policy or program modifications at their own level of authority. Such appears not to be the case. Studies by Kennedy (1980), Alkin et al. (1979), David (1978), Patton (1978), and Weiss (1972), have found that the users' own interests and organizational settings influence the reception they give to evaluation findings. A major implication of these studies is that evaluators or test givers who expect their findings to be utilized either by distant policy makers or by local educators must attend in advance to the specific interests of these individuals and to the constraints of their organizational settings.

The Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE), for the past five years, has been conducting research on evaluation and testing as it occurs within school districts. Our intention in this paper is to describe school districts and the individuals who work there so as to better understand why and how the findings from evaluation and testing activities are or are not linked to instructional decision-making at the school district. First, we will provide background information on the growth of evaluation and testing; then we will make some observations on how the characteristics of school districts as organizations generally hamper the use of forms and evaluation. We will then describe our research strategy which investigates "heroic" school districts who are, in fact, using data for instructional decision making, offer one example of such a district and then present several elements which seem necessary in order for school districts to link evaluation and testing data with instruction.

Background

The last 15 years have seen the growth of what might be called a testing and evaluation movement within American education. The seeds

for this development had been planted decades ago when psychological, intelligence, and aptitude tests to screen and sort individuals were first developed by the military and industry. School districts subsequently followed suit. Many large school districts developed test bureaus which regularly collected and disseminated district-wide test results.

These somewhat dormant testing seedlings experienced an enormous growth spurt and change of direction when Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965. This Act required districts to provide testing and evaluation data to government agencies as a condition for continuing funding. Subsequent federal and state legislation carried similar program evaluation conditions. This reporting requirement shifted the focus of testing from that of assessing individual student achievement to assessing the achievement of groups of students in a funded program. Instead of a counsellor looking at an individual's test score to assign that student to a special educational status, a funding agency would review the collectivity of scores to certify, modify, or eliminate an educational program. In short, large-scale testing of students had become one tool for generating data with which policy makers could identify, discourage, or further develop promising educational programs and practices.

The large-scale infusion of federal funds into educational evaluation since 1965 has had many additional reverberations. One important side effect of these funds is the flowering of what might be called a testing and evaluation "establishment". Elements of this evaluation "establishment" extend to school districts and include: units within federal and state governments devoted to program evaluation and testing;

university faculty and students engaged in courses and degree sequences in testing and evaluation; professional societies within education such as Division H of AERA, and across social action fields such as the Evaluation Research Society; a federally-funded Center for the Study of Evaluation. Inside school districts, the educational evaluation "establishment" usually consists of those testing and evaluation personnel who face the task of carrying out required evaluation and testing efforts. Centralized evaluation units in school districts have recently emerged, often composed of already employed guidance, testing, and counseling personnel. Within the last 10 years, over 400 districts have organized their testing and evaluation capabilities into research, development, and evaluation (RD&E) units which vary in size from one part-time person to dozens of professional employees (Lyon et al., 1978).

At first, academic members of the evaluation establishment outside of the school districts largely concentrated their attention on the logic and methodology of large-scale evaluations. A prime assumption upon which many operated, even though that assumption was not always made explicit, was that federal and state policy makers were to be the prime consumers of their evaluation information; school district evaluators were expected to collect the data meticulously and accurately and file reports. Explorations of the utilization of such data at the policy level (Boruch, 1980; Weiss, 1977) has made it increasingly clear that evaluation and testing reports as they are presently constituted do not have uniform and consistent influence on policy makers. Some reports influence some policy makers under some circumstances. At other times, the reports are used selectively to provide corroborating evidence for policy makers to justify decisions that they had already

made on some other basis. And in still other instances, reports are ignored.

Concurrent with this examination of evaluation utilization by academics is interest by within-district evaluators on the utilization of testing and evaluation information (Holley, 1979). As a result, we have begun to explore whether evaluation and testing originating as a means of satisfying the evaluation and testing concerns of external legislators and administrators, can also serve as a basis for systematic and comprehensive local school district decisionmaking.

The Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE), established by the same 1965 Act which attached evaluation requirements to federally-funded programs, in its early days worked on the development of conceptual frameworks and technical solutions to problems of evaluation. However, in recent years, in parallel with the interest of the field, research projects have been started which are concerned with evaluation utilization both at the school-site program administrator level (Alkin et al., 1979; Daillak, 1980), and at the school-district central office organizational level (Lyon et al., 1978). From these parallel studies of how evaluators relate to clients and of how research, development, and evaluation units handle their activities, it has become clear to us that although the potential does exist, local utilization of evaluation and testing does not occur routinely as a natural consequence of conducting an evaluation or administering a testing program. A special combination of environmental circumstances, competent and data-oriented people, and intentional organizational arrangements seem to be required to link data collection with reporting, dissemination, and support services so as to support instructional decisionmaking and classroom activities.

What are the characteristics of the environment, people, and organizational arrangements that result in use of evaluation or testing data for instructional improvement? One year ago, our CSE project, officially titled "Evaluation Design: An Organizational Study," was funded by NIE to look for and study districts that were purposefully using findings from externally mandated testing or evaluation efforts in a way that influenced their instructional decisionmaking. Hence, the informal title of our project--"Linking Testing and Evaluation with Instruction."

From the beginning, we knew from the literature and our own research and experience in school districts that district-forged organizational links between testing, evaluation, and instruction, are not commonplace. A number of reasons for this nonlinkage have been offered related to factors such as the characteristics of mandated tests and evaluations, the role or training of evaluators, technical problems with analysis, the timeliness of the reporting cycle. We, ourselves, speculated that some of the characteristics of schools as organizations, might also explain the limited use that school districts make of test and evaluation data.

School District Characteristics which Might Inhibit Data Use

Loose coupling. This term refers to the degree to which the various units of any organization are coordinated with and dependent upon one another. For example, how likely is it that a decision made by top management will be implemented at the lower operational levels? Is the coordination among levels tight or loose? Typically, within school districts, the administrative arrangements linking board members and central administrator with classroom instructional activities is very loose. District-level policy decisions relating to instruction may not

be routinely implemented in the classroom (Goodlad & Klein, 1970; Meyer, 1977). The policy makers' intent may be misunderstood, changed, or ignored by classroom teachers. Thus, for example, district administrators who want to increase teachers' routine and systematic use of testing results within their own classrooms may have to take unusual and non-ordinary steps to effect such behavior changes.

Teacher isolation. Another reason why district policy-level decisions related to instruction may not be carried out in the classroom is because teachers often work behind closed doors isolated from one another and from external supervision. Consequently, it is difficult for supervisors to influence the teachers' daily activities (Lortie, 1975). Districts that intend to use evaluation and testing data to influence teacher decisionmaking will likely have to search for and institutionalize ways to overcome teacher isolation.

Permeable boundaries. School districts' orgazational boundaries can and often are breached by external agencies--witness external regulations or mandates from the courts or the state and the federal government. Local interest groups can often put pressure on school-district decision makers. Societal influences such as population shifts, increases in immigration, inflation, changing tax structures also affect districts. School districts, therefore, have to continually adjust their activities so as to meet changing and sometimes conflicting demands and priorities. (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Given this boundary permeability, likely school districts will have to give attention to federal, state and local community interests in and demands for specific types of testing and evaluation data.

Goal ambiguity. In our pluralistic society undergoing rapid social change, the stated goals of schooling seem to shift rapidly. Not only do the goals change; they are often expressed in ambiguous terms. Unlike organizations in the private sector with a profitability "bottom line," public schools must struggle with the difficulties of measuring their successes in "developing responsible citizens," creating "safe drivers," or "students with an appreciation of their historical heritage." The students' attainment of these goals is often difficult to chart. In summary, there is considerable disagreement in our society about the priorities and standards for students' educational achievements. Factors such as these often diminish the utility of test data as credible measures of a school district's success in educating children. However, in districts where, for example, a community consensus might have been reached on goals such as achievement in basic skills, testing data has higher credibility.

In view of these generic school district organizational characteristics, it seemed unlikely to us that most districts would naturally and easily integrate testing and evaluation data with instructional decision-making. It did seem plausible that, in some districts, a combination of external environmental factors combined with the interests and skills of particular individuals within the districts might lead to strong administrative linkages among testing, evaluation, and instruction.

Research Strategy

Our project began by looking about for a small number of districts that had a reputation for linking evaluation or testing with instruction. Using previous CSE research and extensive telephone interviews with colleagues in school districts, state departments of education, other

universities, and research institutions, we identified 40 districts that were thought to have linked their testing and evaluation activities with instructional decisionmaking in some manner. From these nominees, a final sample of six districts was selected. While these districts cannot be viewed as representative of all school districts, they do exhibit characteristics that represent the diversity of American school districts, e.g., differences in size (e.g., large/small), student demographics (e.g., affluent/below-average income, racially homogeneous/racially heterogeneous), locale (urban/suburban).

For the past year, we have conducted fieldwork in four of these districts in order to describe the management structures by which test and evaluation data about students is translated into information that has instructional consequences. We analyzed documents and conducted over 40 interviews in each district built around three questions:

1. What? What kind of linking system do these districts have and how does it work? How mature or fully developed is the linkage between testing, evaluation, and instruction?

2. So what? Has there been any payoff from these linking efforts? Presumably the district linkage system was developed to accomplish some purpose--what evidence is there that the linking system has had its intended effect?

3. Why? If most districts are not trying to link testing and evaluation with instructional decisionmaking, why are these districts the exception? In what environment do they operate? What was the history of their efforts? Were they planned? Who were the critical actors? What were the critical events?

At present, we have completed the first year's work in four districts and are sifting through the data in an attempt to identify common properties

and consistent patterns. Before sharing our preliminary observations on the four districts, we would like to provide a word picture of what the Shelter Grove district is doing to link testing data with instructional decisionmaking.

"What" Shelter Grove Is Doing:

In the Shelter Grove School District, we see a high degree of linkage--in conceptualization and in organizational mechanisms--for the purpose of individualizing instruction in the basic skills. Teaching is closely coordinated with the following: a criterion-referenced testing (CRT) system in reading and math; a district continuum in basic skills; school-site text and film resources; school-site media and learning specialists. These instructional functions and individuals are supported by a Professional Development Program which provides training in diagnostic and prescriptive teaching for principals, teachers, aides and substitutes; by a definition of the role of the principal as evaluator and facilitator of instruction, who must spend 40% of his/her time in classrooms. Furthermore, this instructional management orientation is reflected in the recruitment, selection, and promotion procedures for staff, as well as some principal discretion in local site budgets.

Interviews with Board members, central office personnel, principals, learning specialists and teachers revealed remarkably homogeneous perceptions about instructional purposes. The president of the school board said, "Almost everyone believes in and works hard at teaching individual kids. The kid is the most important thing. We try not to have any throwaways." A teacher said, echoing the sentiments of a dozen of her colleagues, "This District expects a lot from its teachers; it's a great place for kids; they really learn. I moved here so I could send

my own kids to the schools in this District." The Coordinator of materials said, "We really concentrate on having the children learn--basic skills first, as well as the other important things. The parents would not have it any other way."

The conceptual connection between testing and instruction is expressed differently by different people in the District. The Superintendent has a management orientation toward instruction. He advocates teaching-testing-reteaching. "Testing and instruction are intimately related." The Assistant Superintendent is curriculum oriented. She sees testing as the "curriculum in operation." She emphasizes staff development activities for teachers in those curricular areas where student deficiencies indicate that teachers should use different teaching strategies or devote more instructional time to specific subjects. The principals in Shelter Grove see their roles as instructional leaders and understand that they are required by the District to spend time in each classroom. They are familiar with the daily instructional program, as well as with the progress of individual children within their relatively small schools. They use the test scores of students to discuss school level plans, grade level plans and classroom level plans with teachers.

"So What?"

In Shelter Grove, the teaching-testing-training cycle seems to be part of teachers' daily life in the classroom. They were aware of all the operations which were intended by the District to support their individualization of instruction.

All the teachers interviewed knew about the District continuum and the CRT system. They explained the roles of the learning specialist, the media specialist, the principal, and the Professional Development

Program in terms which were consistent with central office administrator's intentions.

For most teachers, the continuum and the related CRT directed their selection of what content to teach in the basic skills. This was more true for reading and language arts than math, where the textbook sequence was often followed. Sample quotations: "The continuum is a real working tool." "I feel comfortable about using it (the continuum)." "My teaching is aimed at it." "I use CRTs in planning. I make a list of areas to work in." "I teach to the test and that's OK." For many, it provides a well-though-throughway to organize their teaching. Others like the emphasis on skills. "We teach skills here in this district. How you do it is your business."

One or two of the teachers we interviewed reacted against the centralized control of the continuum and the CRT system. A teacher said, in relation to math, "I don't let the test influence what I do. I think the continuum has introduced too much in the early grades." A new teacher said, "The first year I just waded through."

For most teachers, the CRT scores are useful in grouping children and in diagnosing their progress in learning. "The CRTs don't provide too many surprises." "If I've taught it well, kids pass." The teachers welcome the diagnostic screening given to new students by the learning specialist. It helps place them in groups soon after the start of school. Teachers report that student instructional groups change frequently based on CRT results. Often they change within classrooms; sometimes between classes. The learning specialist facilitates this process by conferencing with teachers after each CRT administration. The media specialists report advising the learning specialists and the teachers on specific student-appropriate material.

The Professional Development Program got high marks from teachers. They reported that the level one and level two courses (in objectives and in diagnostic/prescriptive teaching) are not duplicates of what they had in pre-service courses. "PDP makes me aware of what I do. I never got this in college."

"Why" Shelter Grove is Linking Testing with Instruction

Shelter Grove is a small elementary school district consisting of seven elementary schools in which there are 132 teachers, 7 learning specialists, 7 principals, and 3,000 children.

Shelter Grove seems an ideal community in which to try an educational experiment leading to improved educational excellence for children. The community and the school district have not been beset by many of the social problems plaguing other areas in the country. There has been no major increase or decrease in population. There exists no large group of children with English-language difficulties. There exist no major political or economic divisions within the community. The community of Shelter Grove is relatively homogeneous. Only 10% of the children going to Shelter Grove schools are minority.

The adults in Shelter Grove are mostly professionals or work in technical occupations. Shelter Grove is a bedroom community serving a variety of urban centers located within 50 miles of the community. The community has been stable with very few people moving out. The population has been gradually increasing, due to new housing in the area.

The District is likewise stable. Fifty-five percent of teachers have been in the District more than 53 years; 46 percent of principals are long-termers. There is a small central office consisting of 5 professionals and 15 support staff. Eighty percent of these individuals have been with the District more than ten years.

Within the District, there seems to be general consensus that learning is important and that children are important. Although this is the rhetoric of most school districts, professionals in Shelter Grove seem to be willing to act in light of this concern, even when such actions require more work, some reorientation in their thinking, some readjustment of territories.

Preliminary Observations on Our Four School Districts

Environmental context. It is self-evident that school districts exist in a social and historical context, as well as within a particular community. It is also self-evident, but sometimes overlooked, that the individuals working within school districts and classrooms are participants in the social and cultural ambience of their times. Additionally they are members of their professional educational communities, simultaneously shaping them and being shaped by them. What struck us forcibly about our example and the other three districts in which we worked was the influence that various environments had upon the district personnel's thinking and actions.

For example, we were told repeatedly that the parent populations in the four districts were concerned about their children's ability to read, write, and do arithmetic. This emphasis on basic skills was translated by teach district in accordance with the professional orientation of its administrators. In Shelter Grove, the diagnostic/prescriptive approach reflected the prevailing instructional orientation of the two universities from which the principal staff members had received their degrees. In another district where their professional training had not been so recent, district administrators responded to the community's wishes by going districtwide with fundamental schools after only a brief year-long voluntary program.

One of the striking similarities we noticed among three of our four districts was the large amount of turmoil within which each operated. One district was preoccupied with responding to court desegregation directives which necessitated districtwide management changes and changes in the autonomy teachers in minority-isolated schools will have in instructional decisionmaking. The district which was moving quickly to transform all of its elementary schools into fundamental schools was under pressure from a conservative school board representing a community becoming more "white collar" in composition. A third district was struggling with a sudden increase in minority and non-English-speaking students who added to an already diverse mix of students. The district was investing enormous time and energy in managing effective instruction for minority children with limited-English-speaking capability.

All these district officials were daily inventing solutions to deal with these immediate problems; they felt no certainty that solutions or procedures they invented for this year's problems would be appropriate for dealing with next year's problems.

In the fourth district--the example cited above--was these particular societal tensions were not present. However, during the period of our research, a heated unification election has been held. The outcome was causing the district to shift from an elementary school district to a unified K-12 district.

In each of our four districts, then, there was evidence of what might be termed goal diffuseness and boundary permeability. The external environment had frequently invaded the districts' boundaries--e.g., court mandates, demands for bilingual programs, population changes, unification elections--and forced district administrators to somewhat

redirect their energies. Under these circumstances, many district goals had been modified. District officials had difficult in maintaining long-term consistency in ordering their priorities and pursuing their goals (March & Olsen, 1976). Given these external conditions, district abilities to develop and implement long-term plans had been severely challenged.

In view of these factors, we felt that it would be surprising if testing of children for the purpose of evaluating and improving instruction was uppermost in the minds of school officials. In the four districts we studied, however, testing and evaluation activities and their linkages to instructional improvement were receiving districtwide attention, although admittedly, it was not the first concern of district officials. Paradoxically, in all four districts the impetus for use of testing and evaluation data seemed to come from the same pressures in the environment which made planning difficult. For example, in the district moving toward fundamental schools, test scores were being considered by the board both as evidence of the effectiveness of the revised program and as a monitroing device for teachers' use in tracking student progress. Shelter Grove's comprehensive criterion-referenced testing (CRT) system had been developed in response to community and administrative interests in individualizing instruction for students. In our heterogeneous district, state assessment tests were being analyzed to see how the curriculum for various populations matched the specifications of the items. It seems that local environmental forces interacted with state and federal requirements to influence district officials to take actions linking testing and evaluation with instruction.

Personnel. One notable characteristic evident in our four districts was the professional interest key personnel had in instructional improvement. A second characteristic was the stability of staff. In spite of changes at the Superintendent level, the individuals responsible for curriculum, instruction, and supervision of elementary and secondary levels had, in each district, worked together over a long period of time. In all four districts, these individuals had evolved methods of communicating with one another and resolving difficulties. This stability, rather than leading to stagnation, seems to have contributed in three of the four districts to a sense of direction more coherent than one would have though possible given the other organizational and environmental instabilities.

A testing/evaluation/instructional subsystem. Although the four districts differed from one another in their size, organization, and structure, they each had developed--some more completely than others--a testing, evaluation, and instruction (T/E/I) linking subsystem. Such a subsystem was not a formal structure that appeared on the school district orgazational chart; instead, it was an alignment of individuals or departments that had, for a variety of reasons, made informal and formal arrangement that enhanced linkage. The subsystem, in some case, consisted of two people, in others more, depending on the size of the district and the way in which the subsystem was defined. It was not limited to those individuals necessarily concerned with testing and evaluation.

Elements Necessary for Linking Evaluation and Testing Data with Instruction

Three components seemed to be necessary in order for the aforementioned subsystem to function: ideas, operations, and coordinating mechanisms.

By ideas, we mean those beliefs, goals, assumptions, sometimes acknowledged, sometimes not, that guide the district's activities. In our four districts, both implicit and explicit ideas informed the districts' subsystems. In these districts where ideas about testing, evaluation, instruction, and management were realistic, accurate, and complete, the subsystem evolved and operated successfully. Where ideas were faulty, incompatible with one another, or not fully shared by managers the subsystem seemed to falter. In Shelter Grove, the guiding ideas shared by most administrators and teachers were that diagnostic/prescriptive teaching and testing were needed to ensure individualized instruction. By contrast, in the district moving toward fundamental schools, ideas about how and why to use test data for instructional planning were fragmented, imperfectly understood or disputed by many people.

By operations we mean those individuals, organizational arrangements, and technical capacities that enable the district to implement and sustain the district's ideas. Districts must have high quality personnel and the full range of operations in order to manage a T/E/I linking subsystem. In Shelter Grove, the district wanted to provide test results to teachers quickly so as to increase their practical value. They therefore needed computer programming skills and access to appropriate computer facilties to insure that turnaround time would not constitute a problem. Likewise, when this district wished teachers to take prescriptive action in relation to diagnostic testing, and it was found that the teachers were not skilled in how to do this, the district provided them with appropriate inservice. In this district, both computer operations and staff development were considered essential operations for linking testing and evaluation with instruction.

By coordinating mechanisms we mean both formal and informal structures and networks that increase communication of ideas, decisions and actions. As we have noted earlier, school districts have often been characterized as loosely coupled; that is, communications and coordination among the various subunits is often irregular or incomplete. In many districts, the curriculum division and school principals, and the testing and evaluation unit, are often surprisingly uninformed about each others' activities and problems. For a T/E/I linking subsystem to work it seems necessary that the various operations and individuals who manage them be brought together for communication and/or decisionmaking purposes. In our small district as an example, this was accomplished through somewhat informal means as well as by weekly meetings of various staffs. In our other districts, coordinating mechanisms took the form of reporting relationships, memo writing, etc.

Summary

We have presented some preliminary thoughts about the conditions which discourage school districts from linking externally-mandated testing or evaluation activities with instructional decisionmaking; we have also indicated that some few school districts have indeed developed the ideas, operations and coordinating mechanisms which permit the linking of testing or evaluation with instruction. During our second and third-year, we will describe more completely those environmental and management factors which impede and those which contribute to successful district utilization of data from tests and evaluations for locally-initiated instructional improvement.

Underlying our work are the two basic points we have tried to emphasize in this paper:

- The evaluation and testing communities must more diligently attend to the characteristics of administrators and teachers working within the district environment, if they expect testing and evaluation efforts to be used at the local level to improve instruction.
- The linking of testing and evaluation with instruction does not happen within districts, schools and classrooms without management, intention and effort. Districtwide subsystems, informed by certain ideas and containing a range of related operations and a variety of coordinating mechanisms, seem to be needed. The search for answers as to why such subsystems evolve, how then can operate effectively, and how they can be facilitated is worthy of continued attention and support.

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